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Regional Issues at the November Meeting: Gorbachev's Options

Summary

Moscow expects President Reagan to raise the issue of Soviet bloc military activity in Third World Marxist-Leninist states at his November meeting with General Secretary Gorbachev, and is preparing for this. Soviet authorities see the President's three-stage proposal for resolving conflict in these countries, which he presented in his address to the UN General Assembly, as a design to shift the focus of world attention away from SDI, undercut the Soviet global propaganda campaign keyed to "star wars" and nuclear holocaust, and justify armed aid to "counterrevolutionaries." The Soviet leadership throughout the 1980s has demonstrated a steady resolve to defend its gains in the states mentioned by the President--Afghanistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Angola and Nicaragua--and has viewed consolidation of client regimes in these countries as an essential element in expanding Soviet influence in the Third World. Gorbachev is not deviating from this line. While the Soviets probably believe that time is working in favor of consolidation of these regimes, they are aware of their present weaknesses and will try to ignite political backfires aimed at deflecting or reducing further outside support of anti-Marxist insurgencies. [redacted]

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, [redacted] SOVA, on [redacted].

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At the November meeting Gorbachev will have no interest in settling the armed conflicts in these "socialist-oriented" countries on the terms proposed by the President. For tactical reasons it is conceivable, although unlikely, that Gorbachev might suggest talks--premised on entirely different terms--about insurgencies in Afghanistan, Angola or Nicaragua. He will not--either to promote arms control objectives or to contain the "costs of empire"--make significant concessions to the United States on Third World issues, although such considerations could affect his decision on whether to take a low-key approach to the regional conflict problem or look to score propaganda points at this meeting. Conceivably he might seek to constrain the supply of mobile surface-to-air missiles and other weapon systems to insurgents fighting against Soviet clients. It is possible that he will present "tension reduction" proposals designed to spotlight areas of US vulnerability and capitalize on potential longer-term opportunities the Soviets see to advance their fortunes in the Third World. [redacted]

1. President Reagan's address to the United Nations General Assembly put Moscow firmly on notice that the United States intends at the November meeting to pursue vigorously the question of Soviet bloc military activity in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Angola and Nicaragua. This message could hardly have come as a surprise to Soviet policymakers; [redacted]

Nevertheless, the Soviet press response demonstrates that the US move was an unwelcomed development. Soviet authorities see this step as an initiative designed to shift the focus of attention away from SDI, undercut their global propaganda campaign keyed to "star wars," and pave the way for further US support of anti-Marxist insurgencies. They themselves have no interest whatever in settling the armed conflicts in these five "Socialist-oriented" states on the terms proposed by the President, which they must read as an invitation to dismantle Soviet influence, abandon clients and repudiate support for Third World radicalism in return for more economic aid from the West. [redacted]

Marxist-Leninist Clients and Soviet Third World Policy

2. Consolidation of pro-Soviet Marxist-Leninist regimes in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola and Nicaragua is an essential element of Moscow's continuing broad-gauged strategy for increasing its influence in the Third World and acquiring new political and military bases from which to expand Soviet influence further. Levels of Soviet military and economic assistance to these regimes have fluctuated considerably over the past five years, with economic aid clearly being squeezed by declining growth of Soviet GNP. The constant factor has been a

basic Soviet determination to make Marxist revolutions irreversible in these countries. The tactical changes made in each case--in levels of assistance and Soviet bloc military participation--have been based principally on the client's degree of peril and on the Kremlin's judgment of what risks the traffic would bear. [redacted]

3. Soviet military assistance in recent years to client "Socialist-oriented" Marxist-Leninist regimes has been substantial:

-- In Afghanistan, the USSR increased the number of its troops by 7,500 men in 1984-85 (now about 118,000) and has taken more forceful measures to suppress the insurrection's growing capabilities. [redacted]

-- In Cambodia, the USSR has played a key role in supporting Vietnamese occupation of the country. Soviet military aid to Vietnam has levelled off in the past three years to about $600 million annually. Without Moscow's extensive economic aid (an estimated $1 billion annually), Hanoi would have been hard pressed to maintain the level and intensity of its pressure in Cambodia. [redacted]

-- In Ethiopia, of the $3 billion worth of arms provided by the USSR since 1977, Moscow sent about $1.3 billion in 1977-1978 and another $1.3 billion in 1983-1985-- [redacted] This aid enabled the Ethiopians to mount, for the first time, a successful counterattack against Eritrean insurgents and to rapidly recapture lost territory.

-- In Mozambique, the USSR since 1981 has supplied some $700-800 million in military assistance. Soviet military assistance rose considerably in 1983, [redacted]

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Deliveries fell off in 1984 (probably due to Moscow's displeasure with Mozambique President Machel's signing of the Nkomati Agreement with South Africa), but they have increased in 1985. [redacted] Soviet economic assistance has also increased in 1985.

-- In Angola, the Soviets have clearly beefed up their military support, raising their 1983 deliveries of arms ($582 million) to $850 million in 1984, [redacted]

-- In Nicaragua, Soviet bloc military aid deliveries in 1984 doubled over those of 1983. Also, the nature of Soviet bloc military aid has expanded [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

4. Soviet actions over the past months have affirmed Gorbachev's apparent intention to protect these client regimes. Like his three predecessors, Gorbachev seems willing to furnish such military support as appears necessary--at least in the absence of great risk or significantly increased costs--to ensure their survival. The USSR does face serious operational and logistical problems in conducting counterinsurgency wars at great distances and in unfamiliar situations, but these ventures are not that costly. Soviet military assistance, while large in absolute terms is--except for Afghanistan--at the margin of existing Soviet force structure, stockpiles, and military production. [redacted]

5. Despite Moscow's concern over the possibility of more forceful US initiatives in the Third World, the Soviet leadership seems to believe that the United States and others who seek to frustrate Soviet efforts there are hemmed in by a variety of constraints which, over the long run, will work against sustained effective opposition to Soviet aims. At the same time, the Soviets probably think they will be able to profit from certain major trends now visible in the international environment:

-- The fundamental shift in the regional "correlation of forces" in Southeast Asia that could arise with the loss of US bases in the Philippines--with or without a successful communist revolution in that country.

-- The accelerating potential for serious revolutionary activity in South Africa.

-- Growing frustration over the US role in the Middle East peace process and a possibly growing inclination of moderates in the region to accept more of a Soviet role.

-- North/South tensions resulting from the debt problem and possible revolutionary upheavals, especially in Latin America. [redacted]

6. The Soviets are well aware, however, of the short run problems of their client states: economic crisis, incomplete systemic and leadership institutionalization, and military vulnerability to insurgent attack. They know Washington has provided steadily increased support for some resistance groups and can see Washington is in the midst of a policy debate over escalation of that assistance to other insurgent groups. The clear reference in the President's address to support for democratic resistance forces is probably read by the Kremlin as an accurate indication of the administration's intent to up the military ante in anti-Marxist insurgencies if this is politically feasible. [redacted]

7. Under these circumstances, the Soviets almost certainly will:

-- Attempt to continue to provide client regimes with levels of military assistance deemed adequate to prevent serious insurgent challenge to client governments.

-- Seek to generate political pressures that will deflect further outside support for insurgencies in client states.

-- Play for time in which to strengthen political, social and economic controls in these regimes.

-- Try to distract world attention from the anti-Marxist insurgencies by focusing on areas of US vulnerability and Soviet opportunity. [redacted]

Runup to the November Meeting

8. Between now and 19 November Moscow will publicly attack President Reagan's proposal, strive to impose its own terms of reference on discussion of regional issues at the meeting, and lay the groundwork for subsequent exploitation of whatever positions Gorbachev advances in his talks with President Reagan. [redacted]

9. Theoretically, Moscow could consider strengthening Gorbachev's hand in the talks by attempting to inflict a major military or political defeat beforehand on freedom fighters in one or more of its client states. Practically, however, time is running out and opportunities to score such a psychological victory are not evident--even if Moscow did decide to risk more publicity for its involvement in counter-insurgency efforts and to expose the steel beneath its current efforts to appear "reasonable." [redacted]

10. The main arenas of Soviet activity, thus, are likely to be propaganda and more finely tuned political influence operations ("active measures"). The most authoritative reaction to date to the President's comments on regional conflict in his UN address has been Gorbachev's speech of 1 November at a dinner for Ethiopian chief Mengistu. Gorbachev did not address the President's proposals directly, but

-- Asserted that the charge of Soviet machinations in Ethiopia and elsewhere in the Third World was an attempt to cover up US interference in these countries, obstruct their ties with the Soviet bloc (i.e., "hinder their free and independent development"), distract world attention from US encouragement of Israel and South Africa, and avoid addressing the nuclear arms control issue.

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-- Declared that the Soviet Union would continue to support Ethiopia.

-- Repeated the conventional Soviet propaganda appeal for channeling funds saved from arms spending to Third World development needs.

-- Approved the resolution of the Organization of African Unity on turning Africa into a nuclear free zone and announced that the USSR would be prepared to observe Africa'a nuclear free status and serve as a guarantor of such a zone.

Lesser Soviet spokesmen have stated that the USSR will be willing to discuss regional conflicts at the November meeting, but have suggested that Moscow's agenda might include US "state terrorism and imperialist interference in the internal affairs of other people," settlement of the Middle East conflict, and establishment of various "zones of peace" and nuclear free zones. [redacted]

11. Moscow probably will wait to see how much positive response the President gets before deciding whether more is needed before the November meeting to put the United States on the propaganda defensive. Thus far, the Soviets appear encouraged by statements from some Western leaders and Prime Minister Gandhi that the primary focus of the November meeting should be arms control, not regional conflicts. If the President's proposal does not achieve much international resonance, the Soviets could very well decide to play it down in their own propaganda--hoping others will ignore it or write it off as simply a rhetorical maneuver. [redacted]

Soviet Behavior at the November Meeting: Gorbachev's Options

12. During Secretary Shultz's recent trip to Moscow, the Soviets reportedly dismissed US efforts to discuss regional issues in order to get the talks back to arms control. Moscow realizes that, whatever it might wish, it cannot prevent the United States from raising the issue of regional conflict for discussion at the November meeting. Gorbachev's choices revolve around (a) acceptance or not of any "linkage" between Soviet behavior in the Third World and achievement of Soviet objectives in the bilateral US/USSR relationship, including arms control agreements; (b) whether there is anything at all to be gained from even discussing the possibility of negotiations over insurgencies in one or more of the five Soviet client states mentioned in the President's address; (c) how actively to engage the President in talking about regional conflict; and (d)--looking beyond the meeting--what the best way is to turn the regional conflict theme against the United States. [redacted]

Linkage with the US/USSR Bilateral Relationship and Arms Talks

13. There are no compelling reasons from Moscow's standpoint to give up gains already achieved in the "socialist-oriented" countries or elsewhere in the Third World out of hopes of enticing Washington to agree to more favorable terms in arms negotiations. Soviet America watchers would hardly feel confident enough to offer their leadership assurances about what such concessions might gain from Washington, and Gorbachev would probably not be able politically to "give away the farm"--even if he wanted to, which he does not. The Soviet leadership does recognize as a practical matter, however, that there is a connection between flagrant Soviet support of "national liberation" activities in the Third World and Congressional treatment of arms control issues. For this reason it may well continue to exercise tactical caution in its support of, or conduct of, counterinsurgency efforts in its client states; and it may choose at the November meeting to argue that it has been acting prudently with respect, for example, to "provocations" along the Pakistan border or to military supply of Nicaragua. If reminded of linkage at the November meeting by the United States and pressed for a commitment to future responsible behavior, the Soviets will probably restate their general principle of support for revolutionary movements. But conceivably they might decide that calculated ambiguity or assertions that "revolution cannot be exported" could be perceived in this context by the United States as tacit consent to restrain specific possible future actions--for example, military supply of guerrillas in South Africa or the New Peoples' Army in the Philippines. [redacted]

Deflecting the Issue?

14. In previous exchanges with Western leaders Gorbachev has dealt with their attempts to raise Third World issues by merely listening and quietly reiterating Soviet positions. He might do the same with the President at the November meeting. Alternatively, he could reaffirm agreement that the two countries' foreign ministers continue and institutionalize the dialogue begun this year on regional issues. The objective would be to terminate the discussion as quickly as possible and get back to arms control. Such a strategy would help muffle the regional conflict theme, display Soviet "statesmanship," and minimize potential tensions that might arise between the USSR and client regimes if serious talks were initiated with the United States. However, the strategy would not provide much of a platform for post-meeting propaganda and active measures campaigns, and would leave the initiative with Washington. [redacted]

15. Taking a more activist stance, Moscow might use the discussion of regional issues at the meeting to score propaganda points against the United States while attempting to manipulate American unease with appearing to act hypocritically or not "even-handedly." Picking up themes already in Soviet propaganda, Gorbachev could try to put the President off balance by directly accusing him of instigating "state terrorism" against regimes friendly to the USSR, of preparing to crank up aid to the South African "puppet" Savimbi, of supporting South African racism and aggression against its neighbors, of working with Israel against Arab interests, of backing military dictatorships in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America, or of exacerbating Third World tensions by deploying nuclear-armed vessels throughout the world. Such an approach might win kudos for Gorbachev among conservative elements in the Soviet elite, but would risk generating unwanted controversy over Soviet bloc military activities in the Third World and might be seen by Soviet strategists as likely to spoil an atmosphere at the meeting otherwise more conducive to American concessions on arms control questions. [redacted]

Recasting the Entire Debate

16. An obvious option open to Gorbachev is to try to put the US in a "no win" position by presenting "constructive" "tension-reduction" proposals that are not transparently self-serving, but acceptance of which would constrain US military power projection capabilities, weaken US political influence, and enhance the Soviet presence in the Third World. If Washington decided to accept the proposed negotiating agenda, so much the better from the Kremlin's standpoint. But Moscow's main aim would be to position itself to (a) link US rejection of the proposals with US "bellicosity" in "star wars" and use this indictment to fan anti-Americanism in Western Europe and the Third World, and (b) to advance political initiatives in the Third World calculated to exploit US vulnerabilities. [redacted]

17. The statement issued by a meeting of leaders of the Warsaw Pact in late October, together with Gorbachev's response to a letter from the Club of Rome on the international arms trade and his 1 November speech, probably provide some clues about the items that would be included in such a set of "tension-reduction" proposals. We might see calls for:

-- A "code of conduct" for the Third World based on "respect for national independence and sovereignty, nonuse of force or the threat of force, inviolability of borders, territorial integrity, peaceful solution of disputes," etc.

-- Resumption of the conventional arms transfer talks.

-- An international effort to effect dismantlement of foreign military bases and a withdrawal of forces from foreign territories.

-- The convening under UN auspices of an international conference on the Arab-Israeli dispute.

-- An invitation to the US to join with the USSR in promoting an Asian Collective Security pact.

-- Recognition of "zones of peace" and nuclear free zones in the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, Africa, Indian Ocean and South Pacific.

-- Approval of principles of North/South trade that paid lip service to the Third World's "New International Economic Order" initiative.

-- Negotiations under UN auspices dealing with the Third World debt problem.

-- Approval of a global program for sharing high technology. [redacted]

We rate the chances of the Soviets presenting some set of "tension-reduction" proposals at the November meeting about fifty-fifty. Whatever the particular mix of proposals may be, the package would be designed not only to deflect attention from President Reagan's regional conflict agenda, but actively to advance longer-term strategems of capitalizing on the perceived opportunities noted just above. [redacted]

Negotiating One or More Conflicts Mentioned by the President

18. From Moscow's perspective, the President's proposal implies actions which are either in fundamental opposition to Soviet interests, or are unlikely to succeed:

-- Promotion of negotiations between client Marxist regimes and insurgents. The Soviets have tried but apparently failed to achieve negotiations in Ethiopia; they are probably uninterested in either having such talks or pressuring Cuba to engineer them in Angola and Nicaragua; and they are probably skeptical about the prospects of achieving serious talks with the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, or between the two opposed Cambodian factions even if they wanted to pursue such a tack.

-- Democratization of these five states. This path would involve a complete reversal of efforts by the Soviets and

their bloc partners to build single-party Marxist-Leninist systems of rule.

-- Withdrawal of bloc military support of clients, with verification. Pursuit of such a move would lead to collapse of client regimes in at least Afghanistan and Angola, serious loss of influence with Vietnam, probably loss of presence in Ethiopia, and major conflict with Cuba.

-- Expanded trade and aid relations between client regimes and Western partners. While the Soviets accept a certain amount of such intercourse as unavoidable and even desirable, their long-term objective is precisely to reduce the structural economic dependence of their clients on the West and strengthen integration of those countries in the Soviet bloc. [redacted]

19. Perhaps the only positive aspects of the President's proposal from Moscow's standpoint are its implicit acceptance of the USSR's role in the Third World as a superpower and potential co-guarantor with the United States of agreements, and acceptance by Washington of non-intervention principles that might constrain future US actions. Conceivably those pluses, supplementing more concrete cost/benefit calculations (including the benefits to be gained from simply being seen to be engaged in a negotiating process with Washington), might lead Gorbachev to explore talks about some of the insurgencies mentioned by the President. It is difficult to imagine why Moscow would broach the subject of Ethiopia or Cambodia, but scenarios involving the three other countries are not totally implausible:

-- Afghanistan. The objective here would be to draw or create the illusion of drawing the United States into discussion of "guarantees" before the initiation of talks between the Karmal regime and the Mujahedeen, with the aim of eroding Pakistan's confidence in US staying power and Pakistani resistance to direct talks with the Afghans, and creating doubts among the Mujahedeen about the continuation of external support.

-- Angola. The Soviets might restate their theoretical acceptance of at least partial Cuban evacuation from Angola in return for withdrawal of South African support for UNITA, combined with implementation of UN 435 guaranteeing free elections in Namibia supervised by the UN. The gain would be a probable SWAPO victory in Namibia; but the Soviets probably would doubt that the US could deliver the South Africans, and they would feel that the MPLA could not handle UNITA one-on-one even though they might be more heartened by FAPLA's performance in this year's offensive.

-- Nicaragua/El Salvador. Any Soviet counter-proposal here would be conditioned by the need for gaining Cuban and Sandinista collaboration, which could well prove an insuperable obstacle. No doubt the Soviets would be prepared to trade withdrawal of Western support for the Afghan freedom fighters for Soviet withdrawal of support from the insurgency in El Salvador; but it is difficult to conceive how they would visualize such a deal being consummated. The Soviets might see hints of it, however, as a useful active measures tactic aimed at undercutting Pakistani resolve. Similarly, while they would see consolidation of Sandinista power in Nicaragua as far more important than legitimation of limited participation of the FMLN in electoral politics in El Salvador, they might see hints of talks between Moscow and Washington about reciprocal incorporation of insurgents into the political process of both countries as a means of sowing doubt in Central America about the US commitment to El Salvador, and encouraging Congressional opposition to further US support for the contras. [redacted]

20. The level of sophistication and destructiveness of weapon systems introduced into Third World conflicts is a question which Soviet policymakers inevitably must address. As we suggest below, it is conceivable they might see some utility in broaching this issue on a global level in the context of a proposal to renew the conventional arms transfer talks. But they also might see an advantage in raising the question on a regional basis. As a backer of counterinsurgency warfare in the five countries mentioned by the President, the Soviets now have an obvious interest in reducing the flow to insurgents of anti-armor weaponry and--especially--mobile surface-to-air missiles and heavy machineguns capable of downing helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. The problem from the Soviet standpoint would be to find something to trade--openly or tacitly--for restraint on the part of their opponents. It is conceivable that Soviet policy planners might entertain the possibility of offering to trade continued restraint in the bloc's supply of such weapons to guerrillas in El Salvador for future restraint in weapons available to the contras in Nicaragua. Less plausible would be a Soviet attempt to gain US agreement to seek restraint in the types of weapons that might get to insurgents in Afghanistan or perhaps even in Angola by means of an offer of Bloc restraint, for example, in overall military delivers to Nicaragua or of Soviet restraint in "active pursuit" along the Pakistan border. It is highly unlikely that the Soviets would initiate discussion of US restraint anywhere in return for an understanding, however vague, about possible future Soviet non-supply of arms to South African dissidents or Communist insurgents in the Philippines. [redacted]